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SCAG adopts transportation plan

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES ---- A regional board Thursday adopted a sweeping \$213 billion plan that will shape transportation systems ----- and growth patterns ---- across six Southern California counties over the next quarter century.

The Southern California Association of Governments' regional council voted 50-2 to adopt "Destination 2030," a blueprint for new highways, freeway lanes, rail lines and expanded airports that will have an enormous impact on travel for Southwest County residents, both at home and on their commutes to work.

"You're looking at an additional corridor between Riverside County and Orange County," said Temecula City Councilman Ron Roberts, first vice president of the regional council. "You're looking at additional lanes on I-15 and I-215. You're looking at an extension of Metrolink from the city of Riverside south to Perris."

Southwest County residents also will get expansions from two to four or six lanes on several stretches of narrow area roads, including Clinton Keith, Scott and Newport between Interstate 215 and Winchester Road.

And eventually a speedy, futuristic maglev (magnetic levitation) train could offer residents the opportunity to reach jobs in Los Angeles and Orange counties much faster than they do can now, he said.

But a cloud was left hanging over the scope and cost of Destination 2030 because of the continuing state fiscal crisis and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal to balance next year's budget in part by siphoning \$2 billion from transportation.

"The state budget problems are not reflected in this plan," said Hasan Ikhata, director of policy and planning for the regional planning agency.

He said the agency, composed of city and county officials from six Southern California cities, may need to amend the plan over the summer after the Legislature adopts its budget for fiscal 2004-05. Lawmakers are required by law to deliver that budget by June 15, but the deadline is routinely ignored, and it could be much later before the precise impact of Sacramento's problems on transportation are known.

The transportation plan affects 17 million people living in the sprawling 38,000 square miles of Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Ventura and Imperial counties. If separated from the rest of country and state, the region would have the world's ninth largest economy.

"The regional transportation plan reflects the growth that's occurring in the Southwest County and San Jacinto Valley," said Hemet Councilwoman Robin Lowe, a member of the regional council. "It will bring congestion relief in those areas."

The plan largely drew the support of Southwest County officials. But Lowe said she doesn't like the part that projects March Air Reserve Base to handling as many as 8 million civilian passengers a year by 2030 ---- more than Ontario International Airport does today.

"Our first commitment at March is the delivery of military operations and our second commitment is air cargo," Lowe said. "I have heartburn thinking about commercial passengers running through there. I don't think it should

be a passenger airport."

Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley told fellow regional council members he was concerned that listing March as a future passenger airport would make it a target for closure next year as the federal government looks to close surplus military bases.

Ontario air traffic, meanwhile, would increase five-fold under the plan, which aims to cap the number of passengers at Los Angeles International Airport, the world's fifth busiest, and spread flights among several outlying airports.

The idea of spreading the burden is fine, Lowe said, but she suggested Palm Springs or San Bernardino would be better candidates than March, which is in Moreno Valley.

As for highways, the plan calls for new car-pool lanes on I-15 from San Diego County to Highway 60 by 2020, and on I-215 from I-15 to Newport Road by 2030. It calls for new freeway lanes on I-15 from San Diego County to I-215 by 2030 and on I-215 from Moreno Valley to Murrieta by 2025.

That section on I-215 north from Murrieta is of particular concern, Roberts said, and local transportation officials are aiming to get rid of the bottleneck at Highway 74 in Perris a decade earlier ---- by 2015.

Metrolink would reach Perris (Highway 74 and I-215) by 2008, and maglev could reach March by 2030, under the plan approved Thursday.

While the plan is contingent on a wide array of public and private money, the association is advocating a 10-cent-a-gallon increase in the gasoline tax. It also is recommending that a constitutional amendment be passed, lowering the threshold at the ballot for adopting transportation sales taxes (like Riverside County's Measure A) from two-thirds to 55 percent.

Lake Elsinore Mayor Thomas Buckley objected to the latter. "I'm a real fan of having to get a two-thirds vote to pass a tax," he said.

Contact staff writer Dave Downey at (909) 676-4315, Ext. 2616, or ddowney@californian.com.